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*by*

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THE PENNSYLVANIA DUTCH FOLKLORE CENTER

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## PENNSYLVANIA DUTCH BARN DECORATIONS

THE barns in the Pennsylvania Dutch country are decorated with curious geometrical designs. They are always the same—a star within a circle. These are the farmers' HEX SIGNS. They are supposed to prevent the devil from entering the barns to give the cows milk fever." So says a writer in a recent issue of the *New York Times*.

Statements of like character are frequently come upon, especially in popular articles on the folk-culture of southeastern Pennsylvania.

Occasionally one even meets up with similar accounts in the press abroad.

A couple of years ago I happened to be en route from Dublin to the Hebrides. Since I had a short layover in Glasgow, I picked up a morning paper to catch up on world events. And on page two of that paper I came upon a feature article on the Pennsylvania Dutch country. A correspondent, whose name I have since forgotten, wrote in glowing terms of the impressive barns and farms of southeastern Pennsylvania. In fact, he called the Pennsylvania Dutch barns the most beautiful barns on earth. That article ended with the customary hex implication: "Between the doors, or hatches, of the barns are the painted symbols these people have always used to ward off the witch's curse or the accident of lightning: the 'hex' sign—sextants or huge seven-petalled daisies enclosed in circles."

### I

Hex signs, but who says so?

Let's seek an honest answer to the question: what do the geometrical designs on Pennsylvania Dutch barns mean?

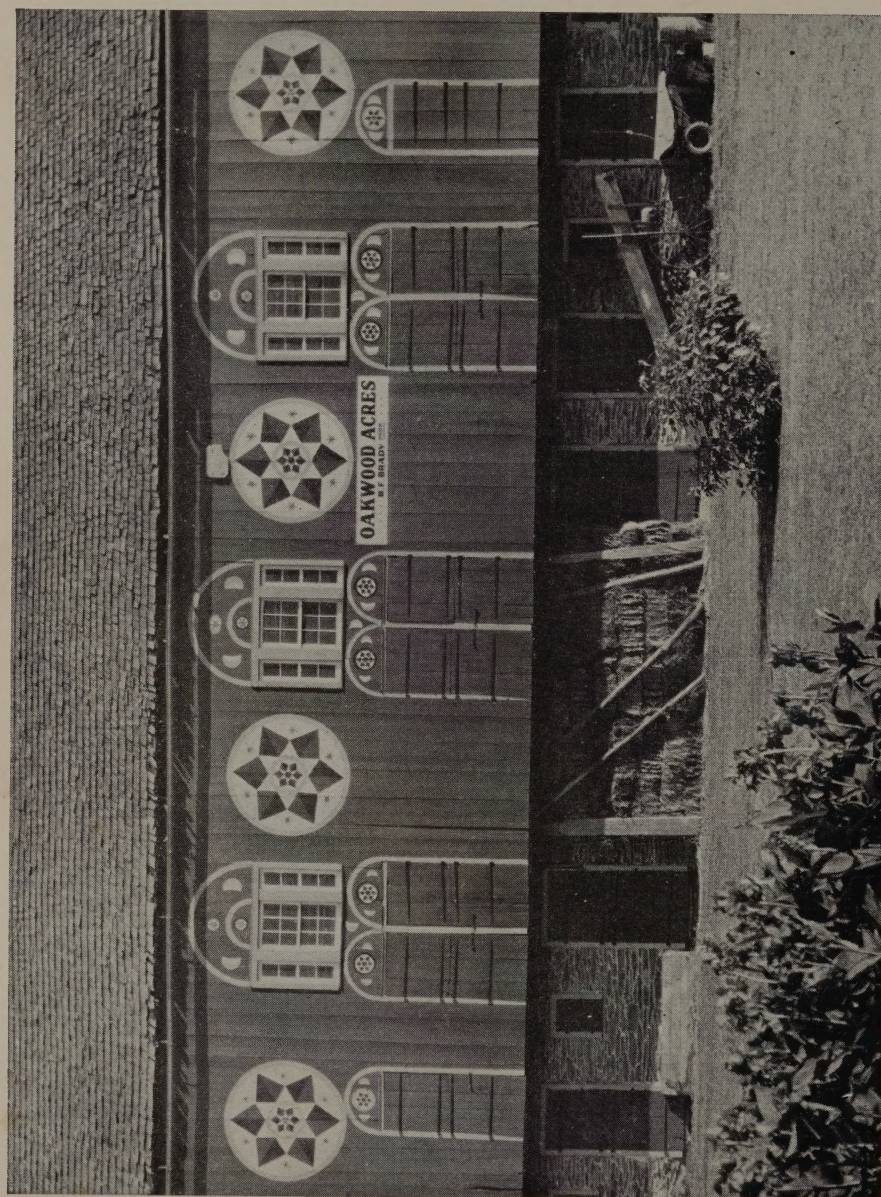
Since the Pennsylvania Dutch are descendants—eight to ten generations removed, to be sure—of German, Swiss and Alsatian immigrants, I spent a summer recently in the folklore archives of these countries to establish the European provenance of what we call "hex signs."

I found the identical geometrical designs as in Pennsylvania in German, Swiss and Alsatian folk art. I even came upon them in ancient caves. Carved by prehistoric man, these designs are thought by scholars originally to have had religious meaning, perhaps depicting the sun-wheel which early man is said to have worshipped.

On a tour of Alsace, under the direction of the president of the Swiss Folklore Institute, Dr. Ernest Baumann, I found what we call "hex signs" on hundreds of ancient Alsatian farm buildings.

In Strassburg, the principal city of Alsace, I called on Adolph Riff, the world-famed curator of the city's several museums and editor of the authoritative annual *Artisans et Paysans de France*. I told Mr. Riff, who has spent long years studying these geometric designs, that writers on





*Photo by Guy F. Reinert*

THE MOST ELABORATELY DECORATED OF ALL THE PENNSYLVANIA DUTCH BARNs. IT IS LOCATED ON U. S.  
HIGHWAY 22 AT NEW SMITHVILLE, LEHIGH COUNTY, PA.



Pennsylvania Dutch subjects occasionally say in their popular articles that these symbols are used to ward off hexes. I asked him his reaction. His reply was: "We have been seriously studying these very same geometric designs for decades here in Alsace—from where came so many of the forebears of your Pennsylvania Dutch—and at no time has anyone ever found any evidence that they are used but for decorative purposes."

That is the present picture. But who is Mr. Riff, who is anyone for that matter, to say what significance these designs may have had, say five hundred years ago? All we know is that there attaches no meaning to these designs NOW.

The "hex signs" are *pure and simple decorative motifs*, not only in Alsace, but also in Pennsylvania.

## II

How did the hex myth originate? How old is it?

Let's examine the printed sources.

For over two hundred years travellers passing through southeastern Pennsylvania have commented on the large and attractive Pennsylvania Dutch barns.

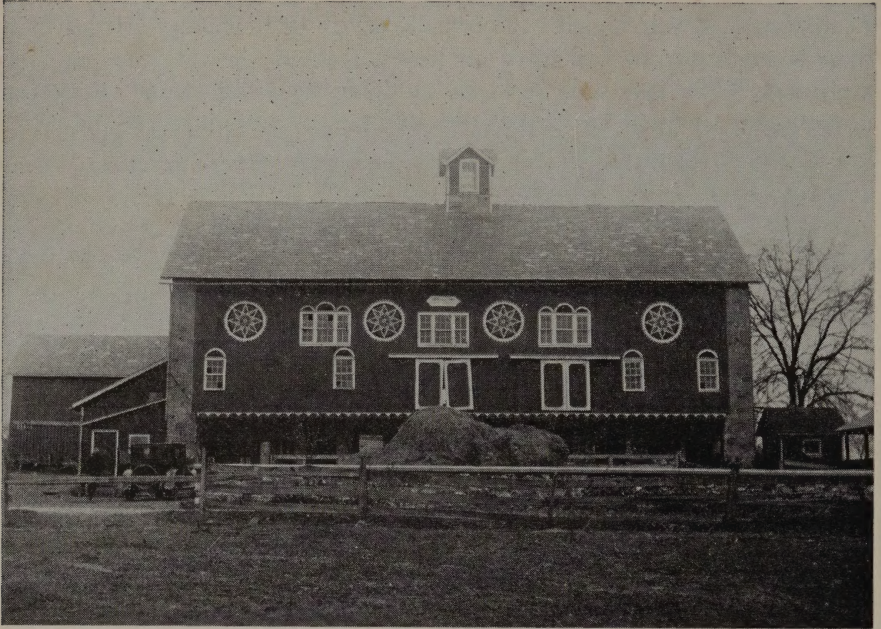
Lewis Evans, in 1747, wrote "while the peasants live in log huts their barns are large as palaces."

Almost a century later, in the year 1834 to be exact, Francis Lieber in his *The Stranger in America* had this to say: "The German farmer loves his farm. In some parts of Pennsylvania this love of the farm has degenerated into a mania. You will find these barns as large as a well sized chapel."

Another observer, geographer Charles B. Trego, wrote in 1843: "The traveller in the older parts of Pennsylvania is particularly struck with the neat and substantial appearance of the buildings, their order and convenience of the arrangement of the well regulated farms. The pride of the Pennsylvania farmer is his barn, substantially built, either wholly of stone, or the lower story of stone and the superstructure of wood, handsomely painted or white washed."

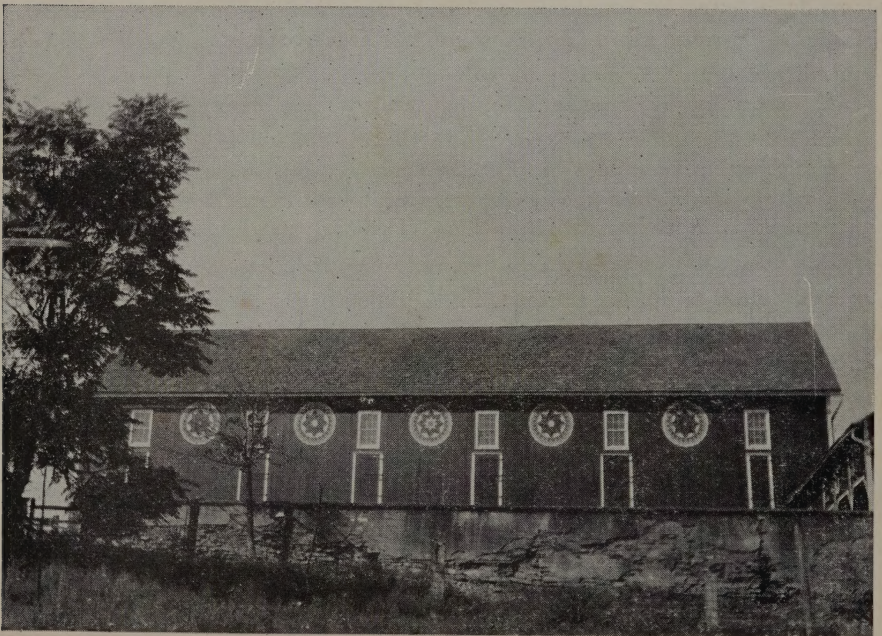
An article on Pennsylvania Dutch barns in the *Pennsylvania Cultivator*, of August, 1848, said "However much before us in agricultural improvements generally, the farmer of the states north and east of us may perhaps be, we claim for Pennsylvania the distinction of being the only State in the Union in which the building of good, substantial, convenient and spacious barns is understood and practiced. Properly speaking, in other States, *they have no barns*—they don't know what a real good barn is—a stable or collection of stables, sheds and out-houses being their makeshift for them. This is a little singular, but is nevertheless true. A journey through New York and New England will confirm our remarks. There is hardly a real barn to be seen. They will have to come into Pennsylvania, and take





*Photo courtesy of H. K. Deisher*

BARN IN EASTERN BERKS COUNTY, PA.



*Photo courtesy of H. K. Deisher*

BARN NEAR SHARTLESVILLE, BERKS COUNTY, PA.



pattern from some of our mighty bank-barns, looming out in the horizon like double-decked men-of-war besides sloops, or like churches beside log huts."

In none of these observations is there any mention of geometrical decorations. In fact, it was not until some *eighty years* later that we come upon the first printed reference to the decorations on Pennsylvania Dutch barns.

In some unpublished notes, the late W. E. Farrell, who spent years studying Pennsylvania decorated barns, chronicled the rise of the "hex" myth as follows:

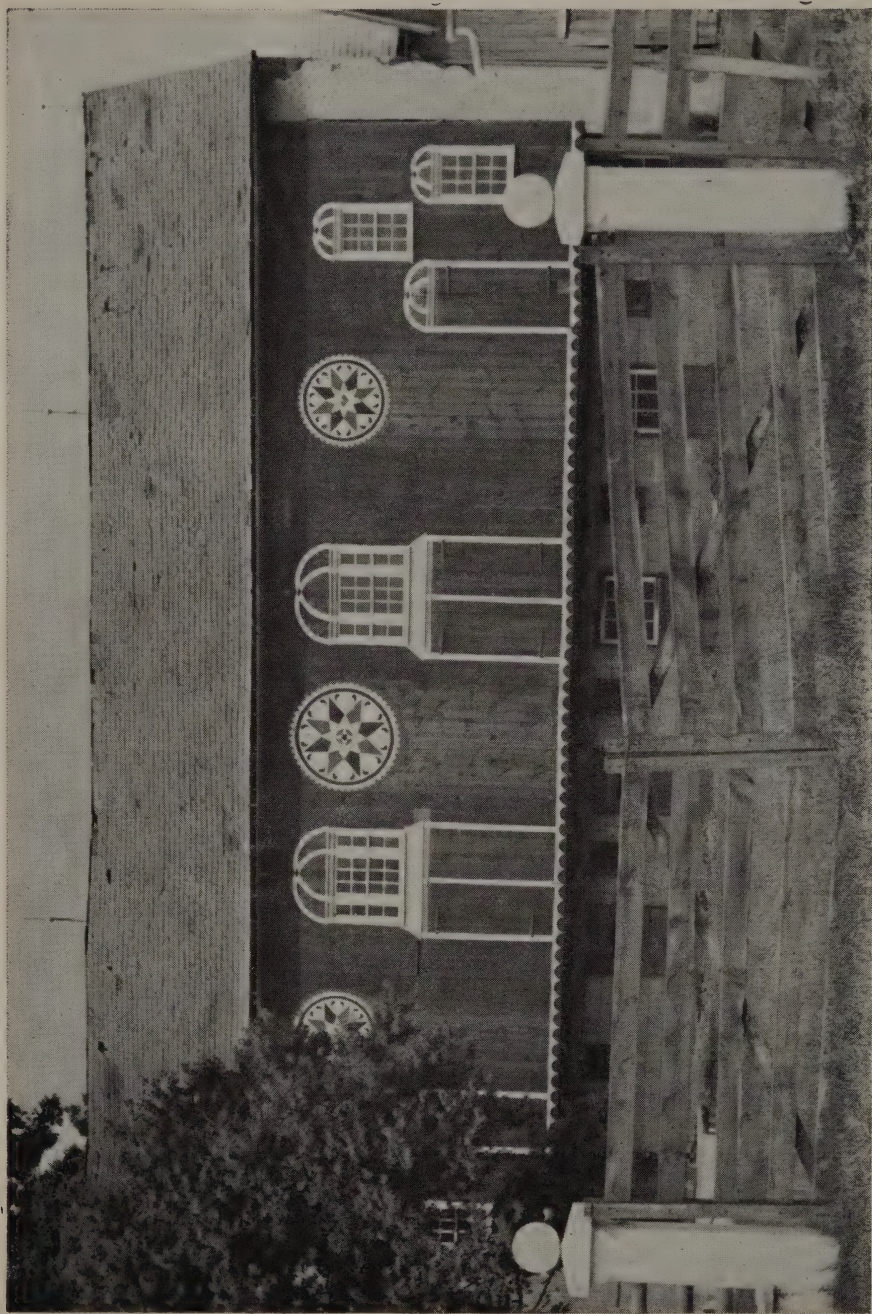
"The designs above the forebay must have been observed for a great many years, but it was not until as recently as 1924 that they were publicized for the first time. In that year etchings of them appeared in the *Journal of the American Institute of Architects* with the following comment: 'They [the barns] are ornamented with sun bursts in yellow or with other curious designs, said to be symbolic and also said not to be. Some day I may be persuaded to find out just what these curious decorations mean.' Apparently Mr. C. H. Whitaker never returned.

"In 1924 Mr. Wallace Nutting published *Pennsylvania Beautiful* after a trip in that part of the State East of Lebanon. In this book he devotes a chapter to the barns, with numerous illustrations. In this book he opened the flood gates to speculation when he wrote: 'The ornaments on barns found in Pennsylvania, and to some small extent in West Jersey, go by the local name of hexafoos or witch foot . . . They are supposed to be a continuance of very ancient tradition, according to which these decorative marks were potent to protect the barn, or more particularly the cattle, from the influence of witches . . . The hexafoos was added to its decoration as a kind of spiritual or demoniac lightning-rod!'

"Mr. Nutting says he got this interpretation of these symbols from a man he met in Bethlehem, who convinced him that the emigrants brought it with them from the Palatinate.

"Following this Mr. John T. Faris published his *Old Trails and Roads in Penn's Land* in 1927. He wrote: 'The barns must be painted gloriously red. And it must be ornamented with the most grotesque designs, outlined in white, planned to frustrate the machinations of spirits that plan evil for the farmer's horses and cattle. These ornaments are called hexafoos, or 'witch foot.' They are a sort of spirit or demoniac lightning-rod.'"

Mr. Farrell seemingly missed the question in the January, 1906, issue of the *Pennsylvania German*. It was: "Circles and Stars on Barns. What is the reason for painting circles and stars on the front of a barn, as is the custom in this section of the State? Did these figures ever have any special significance in this connection?—W. L. H., Allentown." The answer which followed went like this: "Not to our knowledge. We never considered



BARN BETWEEN PERKIOMEN HEIGHTS AND GREEN LANE, MONTGOMERY COUNTY, PA.  
*Photo by Guy F. Reinert*



those circles and stars as anything more than ornaments, chosen for this purpose because they can be easily drawn and painted. Still it is possible that they originally had some mystic or symbolical significance which has been forgotten."

### III

How could the "hex sign" myth become so easily entrenched?

The answer is simple. In the 1920s, when it originated, it wasn't common knowledge that the same design appeared commonly at an earlier period on practically every object that was ever decorated in the Pennsylvania Dutch country—on dower chests, sgraffito plates, birth and baptismal certificates, hand-illuminated book plates, tool boxes on Conestoga wagons, the keystone arches of churches, yes even on tombstones.

How come, you ask, didn't people know these things around 1920? For the reason that folk art had died out in the early decades of the previous century. At the time the myth originated, therefore, no one—with the possible exception of a few specialists—knew anything about the old decorative motifs. Remember also, this was the time before the present-day widespread interest in Pennsylvania Dutch antiques.



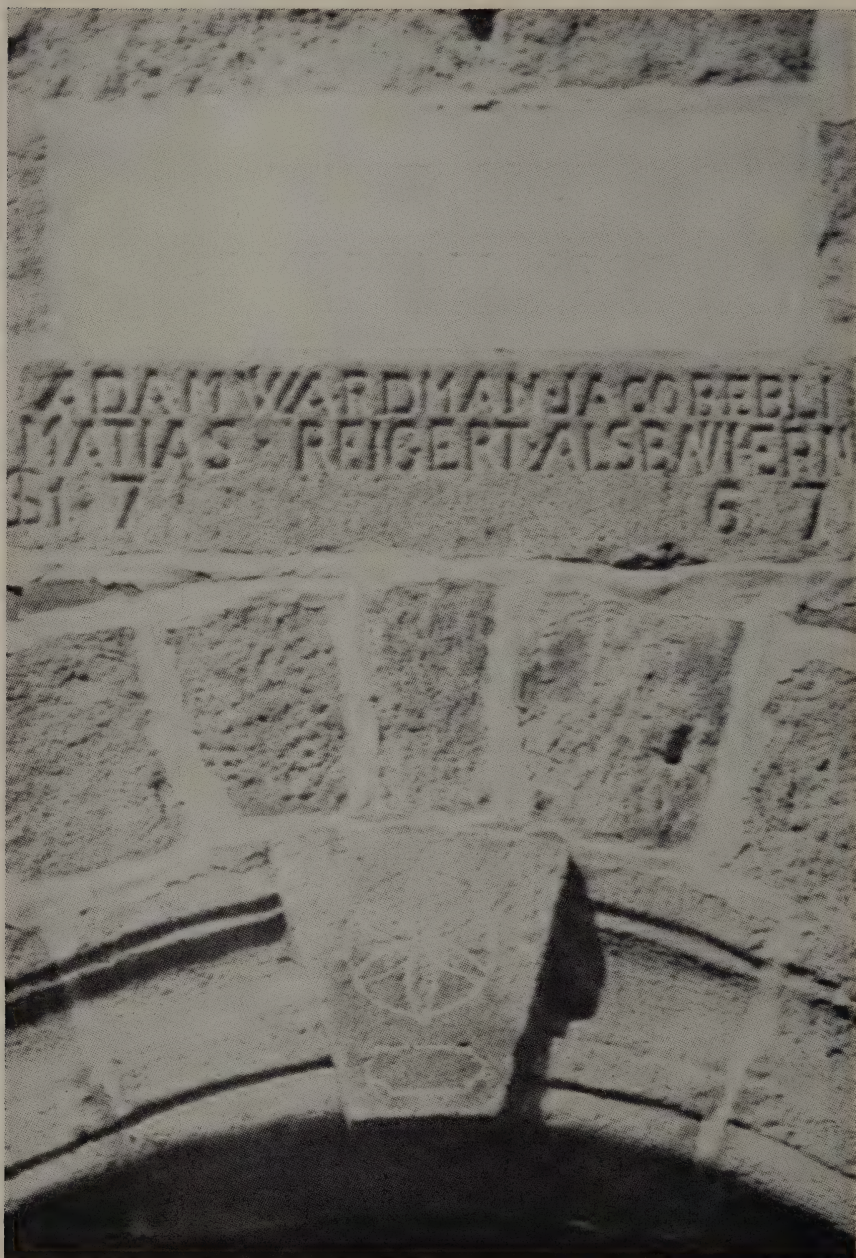
Then, around 1920, the only place where the old decorative design had survived was on the Pennsylvania Dutch barn. But, as I say, no one then any longer remembered the folk art tradition of earlier year, when everything that was decorated bore the same stamp. The myth of the "hex sign" was conceived and nurtured, therefore, in a time when there was only ignorance about folk-culture, not only here in Pennsylvania, but the world over.

When were Pennsylvania Dutch barns first decorated? We do not know exactly, however it wasn't until relatively late. And why not? For the simple reason that barns were not painted before about 1830.

Isn't it only natural, when the Pennsylvania Dutch farmer began to paint his barn, that he should have transferred to the wide barn front the very same decorative motif that adorned everything else?

### IV

But most interesting of all is the fact that only a small section of the Pennsylvania Dutch country has the decorated barn. The late W. E. Farrell, who photographed thousands of Pennsylvania Dutch barns, was



*Photo by Guy F. Reinert*

"HEX MARK" IN THE KEYSTONE OF THE ARCH ABOVE THE ENTRANCE TO THE SWAMP LUTHERAN CHURCH IN NEW HANOVER TOWNSHIP, MONTGOMERY COUNTY, PA.





*Photo courtesy of H. K. Deisher*

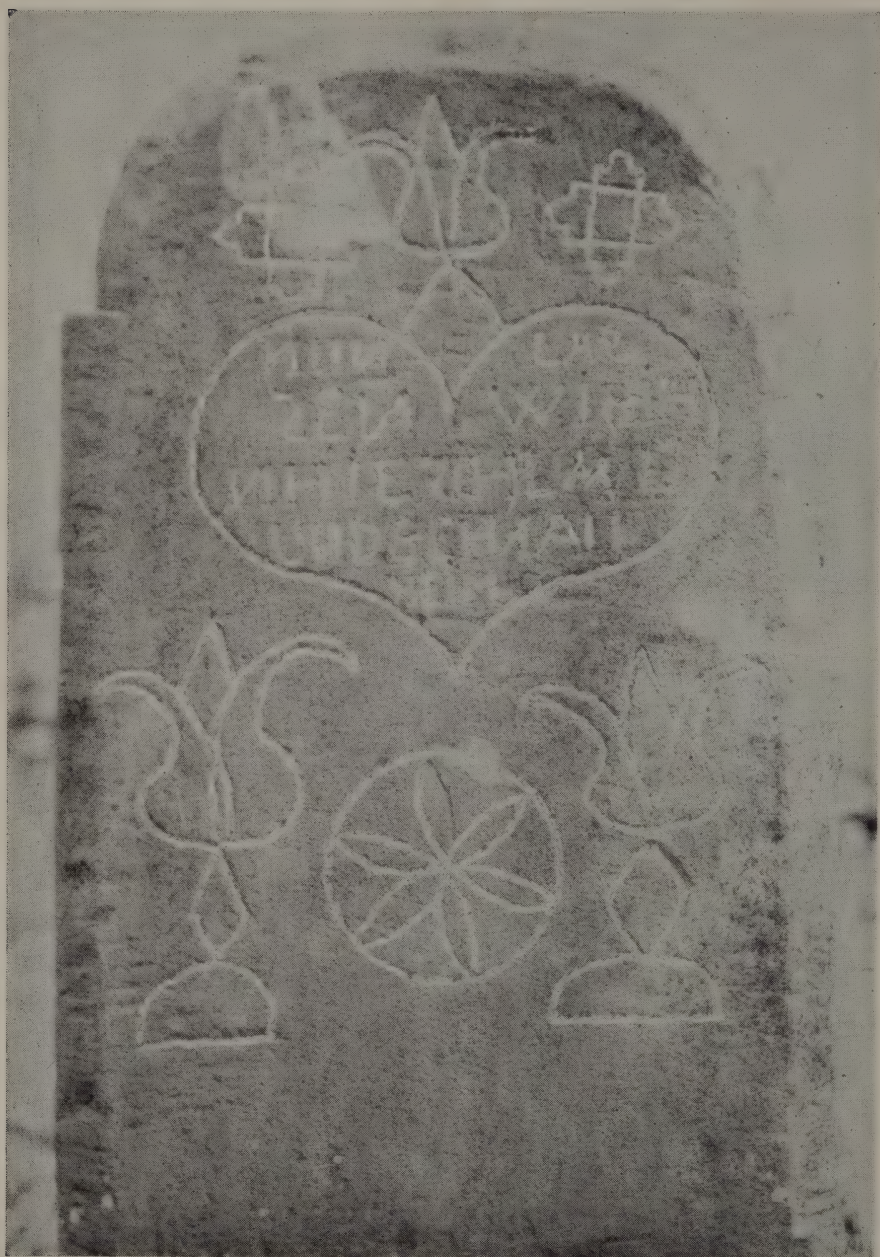
BARN IN EASTERN BERKS COUNTY, PA.



*Photo by Guy F. Reinert*

BARN IN LONGSWAMP TOWNSHIP, BERKS COUNTY, PA.





*Photo by Guy F. Reinert*

GRAVESTONE IN ST. PAUL'S UNION CHURCH CEMETERY NEAR CHERRYVILLE,  
NORTHAMPTON COUNTY, PA.





*Photo by Guy F. Reinert*

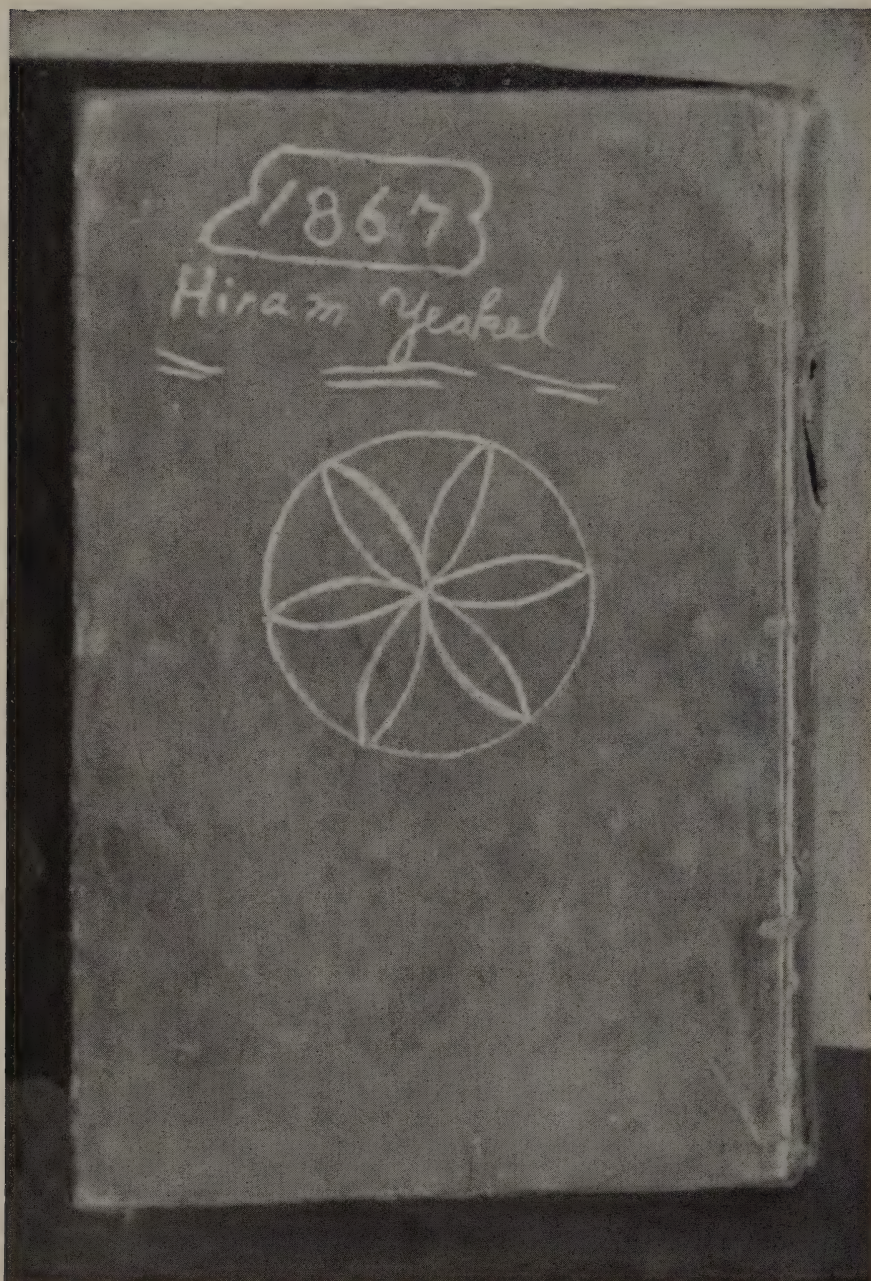
REAR OF BARN, LOCATED BETWEEN MACUNGIE AND TREXLERTOWN, LEHIGH COUNTY, PA.



*Photo by Guy F. Reinert*

BARN NEAR WESCOESVILLE, LEHIGH COUNTY, PA.





*Photo by Guy F. Reinert*

PRAYER BOOK "CHRISTLICHE BETRACHTUNGEN," PRINTED IN ALLENTOWN, PA., IN 1842





*Photo by Guy F. Reinert*

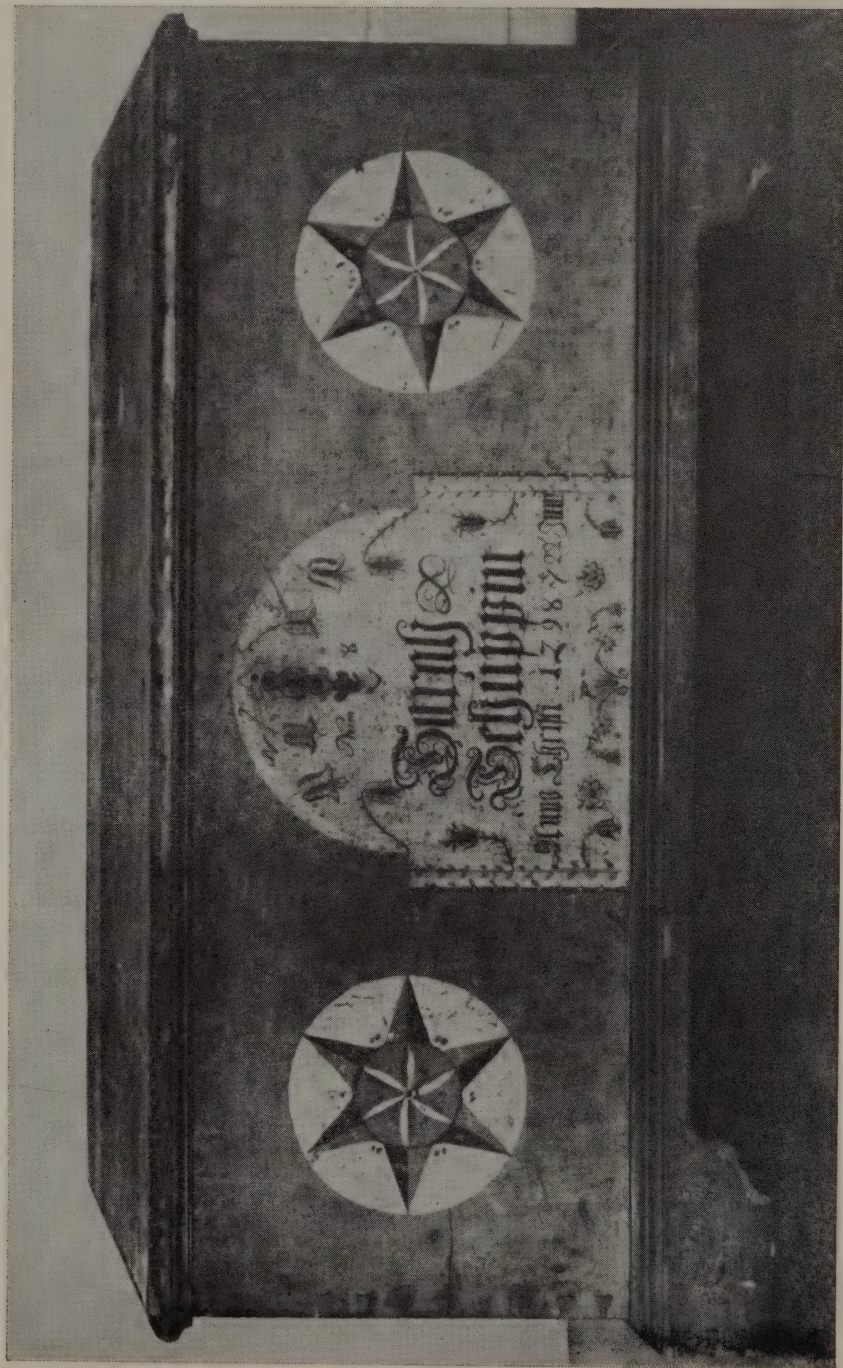
BARN IN SOUTH WHITEHALL TOWNSHIP, LEHIGH COUNTY, PA.



*Photo by Guy F. Reinert*

BARN IN BERKS COUNTY, PA., BETWEEN NEW BERLINVILLE AND BALLY





DOWER CHEST IN THE COLLECTION OF THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF BERKS COUNTY, READING, PA.





*Photo courtesy of H. K. Deisher*

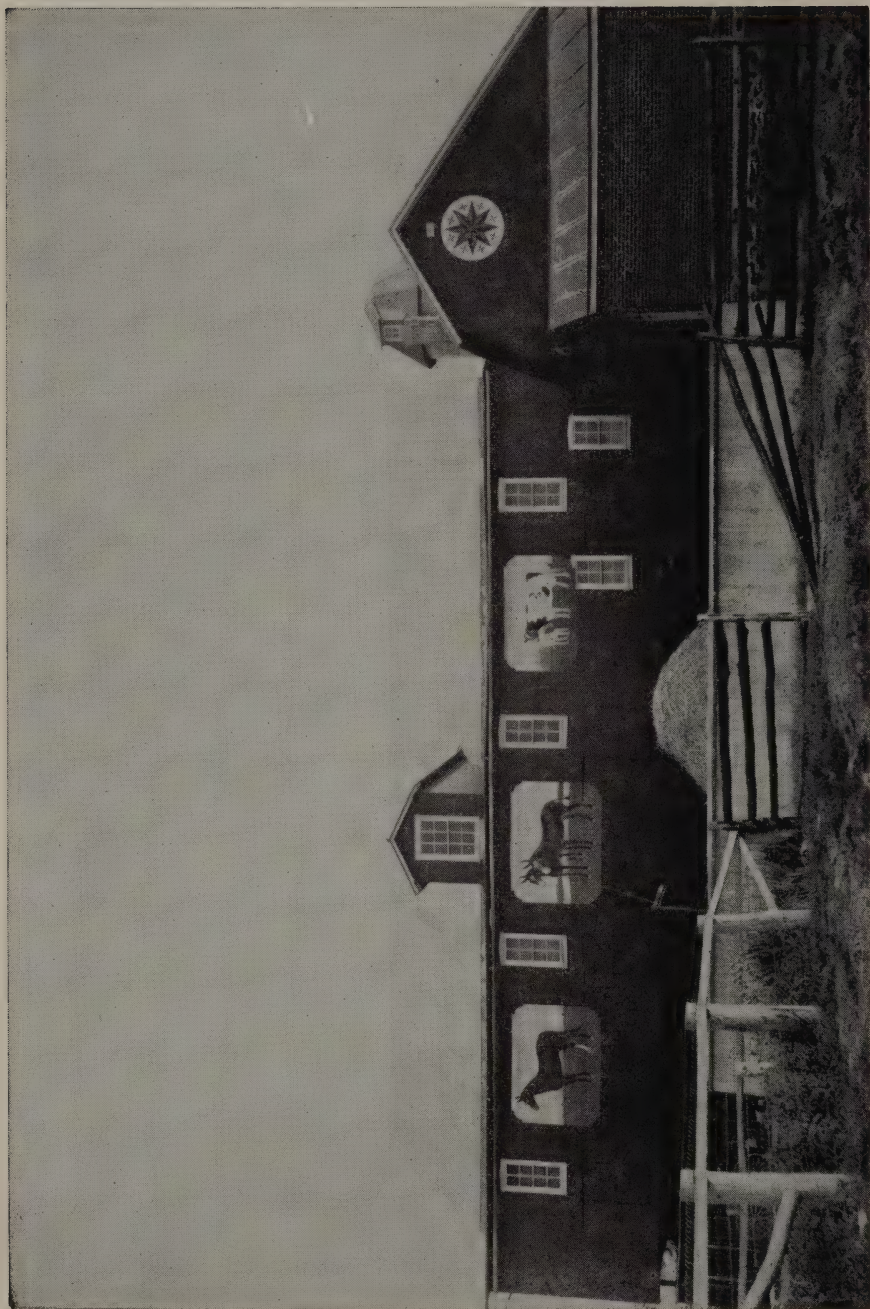
BARN IN BERKS COUNTY, PA.



*Photo courtesy of H. K. Deisher*

BARN NORTHWEST OF PIKEVILLE, BERKS COUNTY, PA.





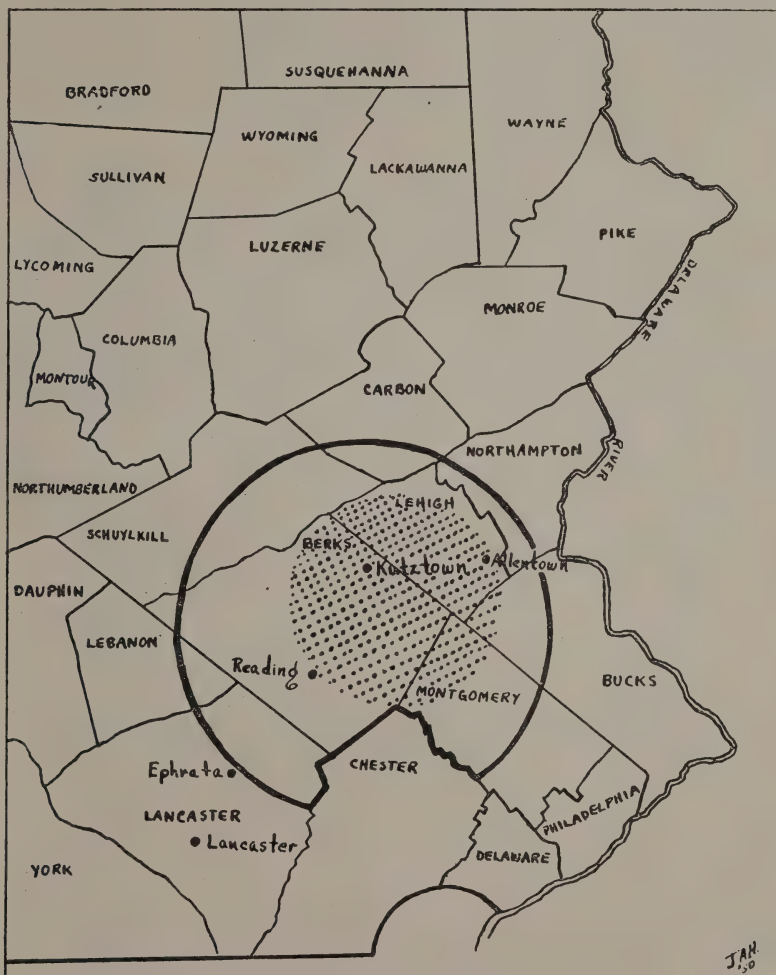
*Photo courtesy of H. K. Deisher*

BARN BETWEEN LYONS AND FLEETWOOD IN BERKS COUNTY, PA.



the first to establish this fact. He has shown that the area is principally in Lehigh, Berks, Bucks and Montgomery counties. There are no "hex signs" in most of Lancaster and Lebanon counties and none (excepting sporadic recent innovations) in York, Adams, Snyder, Northumberland and other counties of the Pennsylvania Dutch country.

If there were any basis to the witch angle, wouldn't it be awfully peculiar that half of the Pennsylvania Dutch country only believes in warding off hexes and the other half doesn't? Moreover, isn't it plain, common sense that magic, wherever it is practiced (and no one would deny its existence in the Pennsylvania Dutch country), isn't it plain, common



FARRELL MAP SHOWING AREAS WHERE THE "HEX SIGNS" ARE FOUND. THE LARGER CIRCLE IS THE OUTER PERIPHERY. THE DOTTED CIRCLE LOCATES THE PRINCIPAL AREA OF DECORATION



*Photo by Guy F. Reinert*

DATE STONE UNDER FOREBAY OF BARN IN SINKING SPRING, BERKS COUNTY, PA.



sense, I say, that a farmer would NOT parade his mysterious doings before all the world to see? No, my dear reader, witchcraft and all that hangs together with it, is a very, very *secret* matter, all of it surviving underground, well hidden from view to all but the initiated. Anyone with the slightest insight into human nature must sense how utterly preposterous is the whole "hex sign" story.

## V

But back to the statement that barns are decorated in only a small section of the Pennsylvania Dutch country. How come? The answer is not a simple one by any means. Why, for instance, doesn't the farmer in Snyder County decorate his barn with the geometric patterns? Didn't most Snyder countians migrate from Berks County? They did, indeed. But why then no "hex signs" in Snyder County, you ask? The answer seems to be that the migration from Berks County took place at a time before barns were even painted, therefore before the idea of decorating barns was born. And what is more, between the Dutch counties of Berks and Snyder there developed the coal regions, which became populated with non-Pennsylvania Dutch people. There thus arose a real physical barrier and at a time when family ties were already broken between the two sections.

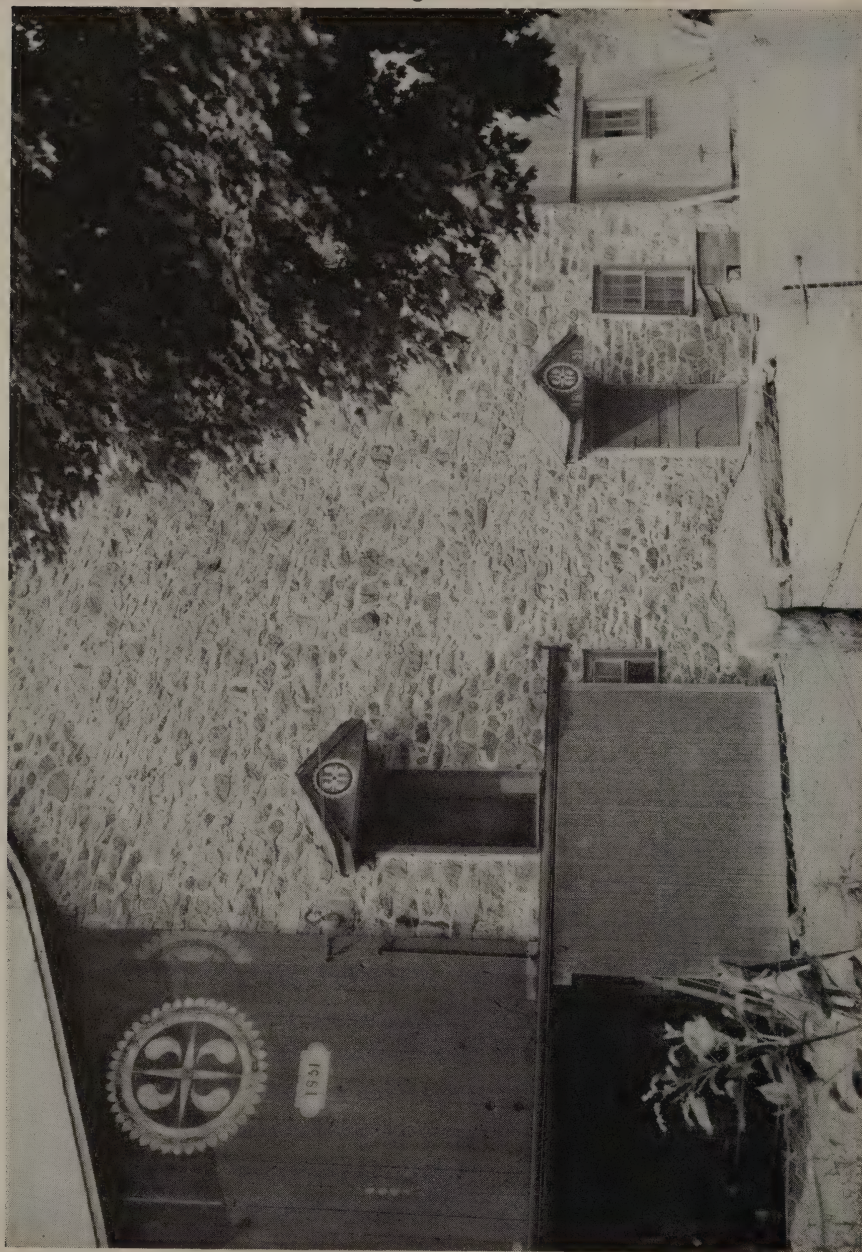
Why aren't there any "hex signs" in York and Adams Counties and the areas to the west. The reason seems to be again because of the existence of a barrier. This time it is the Plain People—the Amish and Mennonites, in particular.

Why shouldn't an Amishman, who is a Pennsylvania Dutchman, of course, decorate his barn with "hex signs"? Is it that he is opposed to color, perhaps? No, not at all. Rather, the reason is that among these Plain People the geometric design was never traditional. Where, I ask, would you have found the motif among the Amish? On a birth and baptismal certificate, as in Lehigh County, perhaps? Impossible! The Amish do not practice infant baptism and consequently had no birth and baptismal certificates to decorate to begin with. They erected only small gravestones, all of them uniform in size. This left no room for decoration. Could one expect the "hex signs" on the keystone arches of churches as in the solidly Lutheran and Reformed sections farther East. Very obviously not, since the Old Order Amish have never had church buildings; they have always met for religious services in their homes.

In other words the folk-culture of the Plain People acted as a buffer and stayed the spread to the West of the decorative motif.

## VI

Another reason that the myth gained a foothold so easily is that, prior to the coinage of the word "hex sign," there was no local word to designate the decorative designs. To be sure the Pennsylvania Dutch themselves



*Photo by Guy F. Reinert*

SIDE OF BARN ON ROAD FROM ZIONSVILLE TO VERA CRUZ, LEHIGH COUNTY, PA.



spoke of the designs in their dialect as *schtanna*—stars, or *blumma*—flowers, but both of these terms were mere makeshifts. Around 1920, in other words, there was a complete vacuum: neither was there a word for the geometric design itself, nor, as I have indicated, was there any knowledge of the presence of the design on scores of decorated objects in previous decades.

What name should we use to designate these geometric decorations? It seems to me there is nothing to do but accept "hex sign." It is certainly the only one that has wide currency. The only thing I would ask is that our citizenry be educated to the fact that *no Pennsylvania Dutchman ever painted designs on his barn to ward off evil spirits.*

However, one word of caution even here. No matter how well we may try to educate, people I am afraid will still go on saying "hex signs" are symbols put up to ward off evil spirits. And this for the very good reason that the myth is interesting, fascinating, and is exactly what the tourist wants to hear. The facts themselves are admittedly colorless. In the final analysis, don't all of us continue believing what we want to believe, come hell or high water?

There is only one other observation I have to make pertinent to "hex signs." Prof. August C. Mahr, in an article on this subject in the *Ohio State Archaeological and Historical Quarterly*, January-March, 1945, writes that we Pennsylvania Dutch are not telling the outsider the facts, that we are sensitive and gloss over the hidden meaning behind our barn decorations.

Another student of Pennsylvania Dutch black magic, the Rev. Luther N. Schaeffer of Northampton, Pa., thinks that in a rare number of cases a farmer may actually have a purpose—other than beauty—for putting the decorations on his barn. Some of us, I am afraid, become confused because we are not able to distinguish between what an informant *says* he believes and what he really believes.

A Pennsylvania Dutchman myself and a lifelong student of our folk beliefs, I must say with absolute honesty that I have never found a single shred of evidence to substantiate any other conclusion but this: "*hex signs*" are used but for one purpose, and to put it in the Pennsylvania Dutchman's own words, "*chust for nice.*"



## BARN ARCHITECTURE

Let us now turn to a short discussion of the Pennsylvania Dutch barn itself—its architecture, in other words.

Up to now, writers have interested themselves exclusively in the decorations on the barns. The only consideration I happen to know of thus far accorded the subject of the architecture of Pennsylvania Dutch barns was in an architectural exhibition in Edinburgh Scotland, a number of years ago. Here the Pennsylvania Dutch barn was shown to be an important contribution to regional American architecture.

What are the characteristics of a Pennsylvania Dutch barn? What distinguishes a bank or Swiss barn—both common names for the Pennsylvania Dutch-type barn—from the English-type barn found but rarely in southeastern Pennsylvania?

Here are two photographs, one of the English-type barn and the other the Pennsylvania Dutch barn.



*Photo courtesy of H. K. Deisher*

THIS ENGLISH-TYPE BARN IS LOCATED A MILE EAST OF KUTZTOWN, BERKS COUNTY, PA. NOTE ITS FEATURE: STABLES AND MOWS ALL ON GROUND-FLOOR LEVEL





Photo courtesy of H. K. Deisher

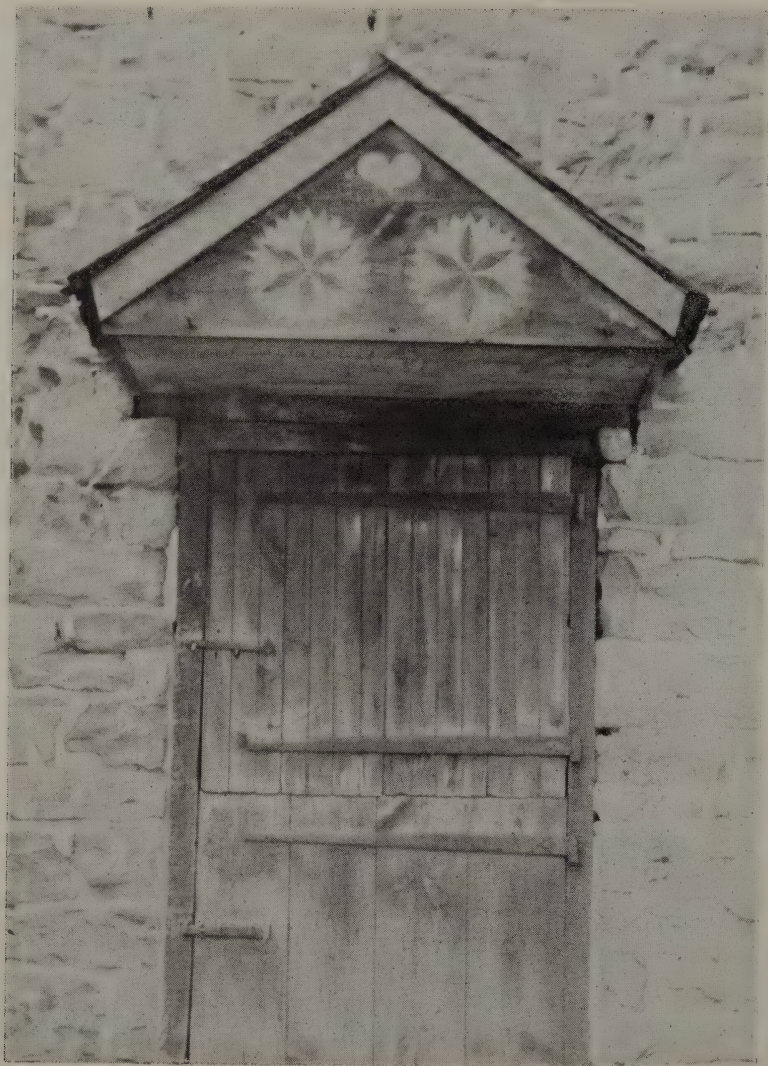
PENNSYLVANIA DUTCH-TYPE BARN IN OLEY, BERKS COUNTY, PA.  
THIS BARN WAS BUILT IN 1735

Note the following characteristic features of the bank or Swiss barn, the Pennsylvania Dutch barn:

- a) the ground floor is used exclusively for stabling the animals. The English-type barn, a one-floor structure, has the stables and mows all on the ground level.
- b) the second story with the threshing floor in the middle, flanked by the mows on either side.
- c) the projection of the second floor over the stables. This projection is called either a *forschuss* or *forbau* in the Pennsylvania Dutch dialect, and a foreshoot or forebay in English.
- d) the entrance to the second story is on a level if the barn is built against a bank (hence the name "bank barn"); or by a ramp, called a *scheier-brick* in the dialect, when the barn is located on level ground as is most often the case.

These are the characteristic features of the Pennsylvania Dutch barn. Occasionally one finds a small door, with a forebay, in the end nearest the house. This forebay, like the foreshoot itself, is frequently decorated.

The prototype of the Pennsylvania Dutch barn is supposed to be the Swiss barn (hence the term Swiss barn as a synonym for the Pennsylvania Dutch barn).



*Photo by Guy F. Reinert*

CANOPY OVER FEED ENTRY OF BARN IN SOUTH WHITEHALL TOWNSHIP,



The Swiss barns, that is the barns in Switzerland, have the same general layout as the Pennsylvania Dutch barn: the ground floor for stabling and the second story, with threshing floor and mows. The basic difference between the two is that the approach to the Swiss barn is at one or both ends, while in Pennsylvania Dutch barns it is in the center of the side opposite the forebay or foreshoot.

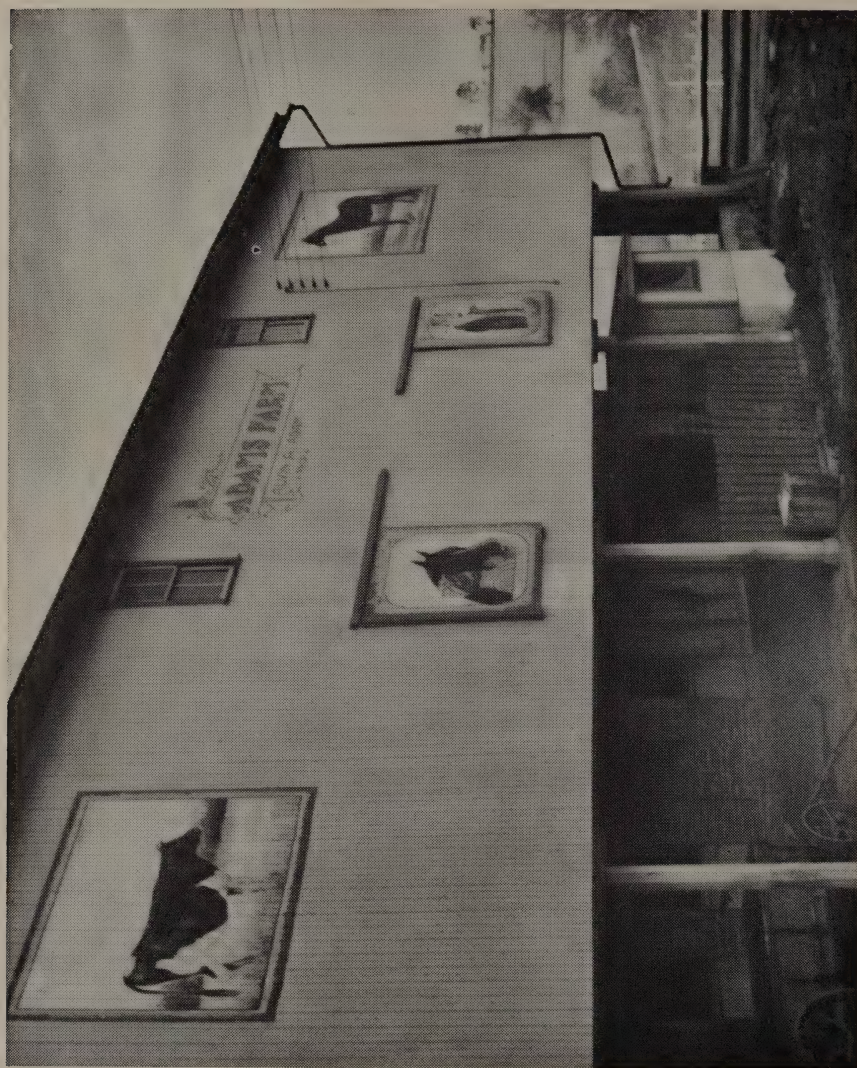
In conclusion, I should like to quote briefly from an article by the Rev. Benjamin Bausman, which appeared in the Lancaster German-language newspaper, the *Volksfreund*, of Sept. 24, 1884. Rev. Bausman wrote from Switzerland, where he happened to be traveling at the time: "In Switzerland we feel very much at home. There is much to see that reminds one of home. For example, here one sees the original Swiss barns after which all our Pennsylvania Dutch barns were patterned. They have a ground floor for the stables and the second story serves as threshing floor and mow space. There is a forebay along the entire front of the barn." This, as far as I know, is the first reference to the basic architectural similarity between the barns of Switzerland and those of the Pennsylvania Dutch country. In brief, this is the story of the Pennsylvania Dutch barn, the "palaces" of the Keystone State.



Photo courtesy of H. K. Deisher

BARN TWO MILES SOUTH OF KUTZTOWN, BERKS COUNTY, PA.

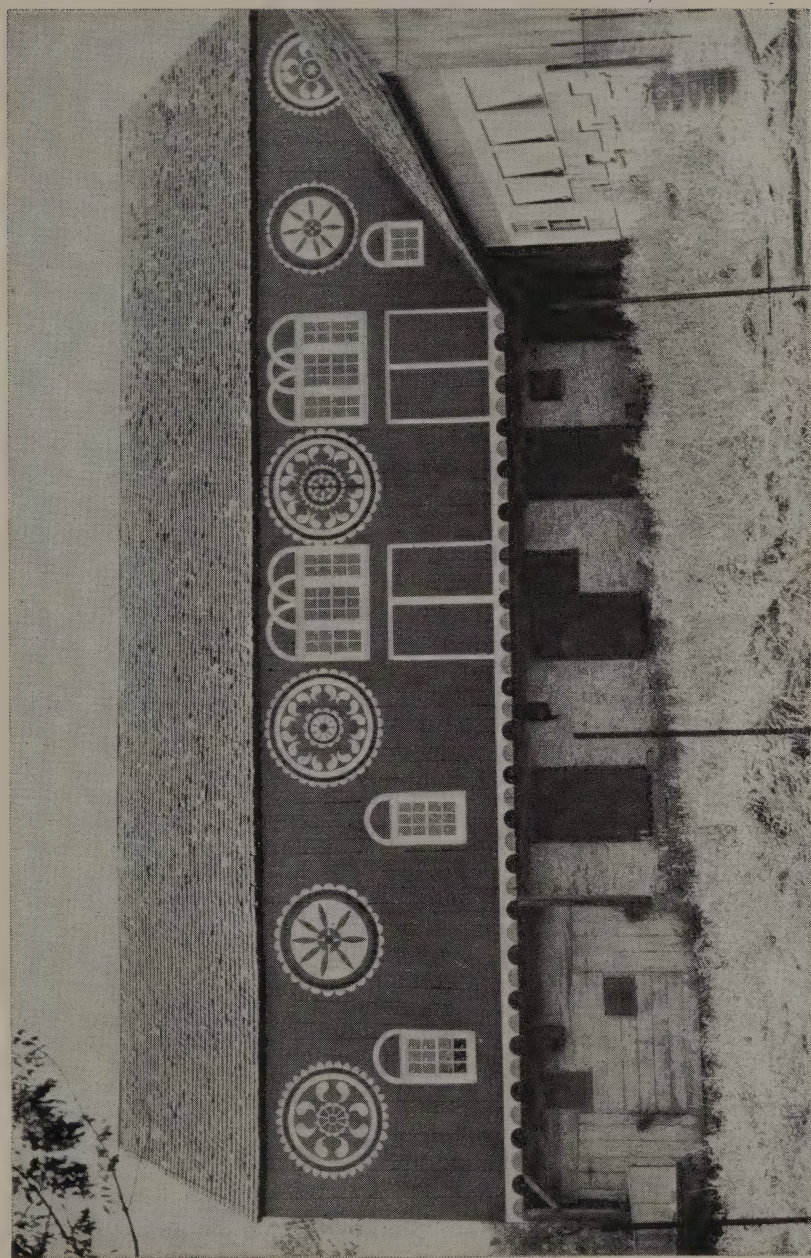




*Photo by Gay F. Reinert*

BARN SCENES CREATED BY THE LATE ROBERT SEIDEL ON THE ADAMS BARN NEAR KRUMSVILLE.





ELABORATELY DECORATED BARN BETWEEN STEINBURG AND COOPERSBURG, IN BUCKS COUNTY, PA.  
*Photo by Guy F. Reinert*





THATCHED ROOF OF BARN NEAR SCHAFERSTOWN, LEBANON COUNTY, PA.  
THE OLD BARN WAS DISMANTLED IN 1893



BARN IN BERKS COUNTY, PA.

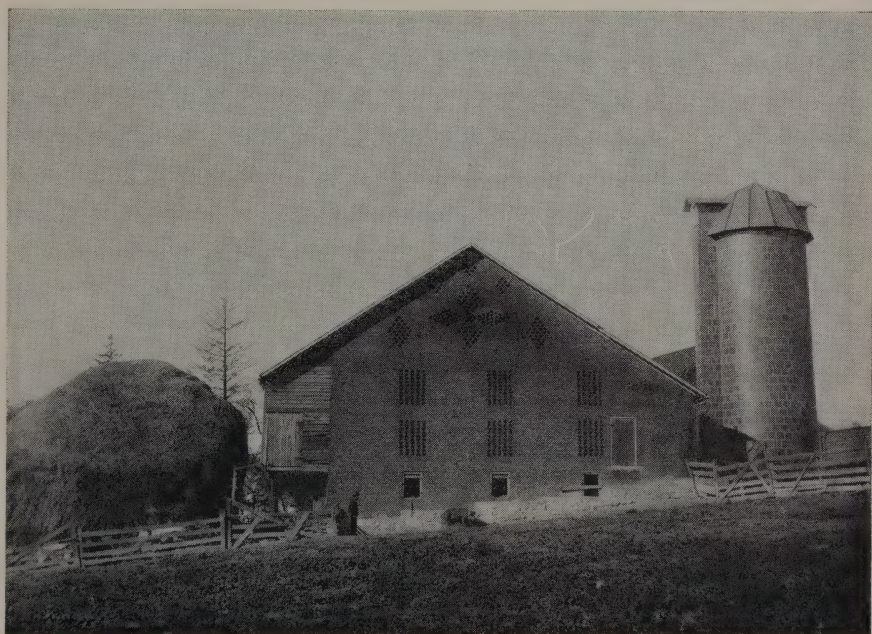
*Photo courtesy of H. K. Deisher*





*Photo courtesy of H. K. Deisher*

BRICK-END DECORATED BARN NEAR MECHANICSBURG, CUMBERLAND COUNTY, PA.



*Photo courtesy of H. K. Deisher*

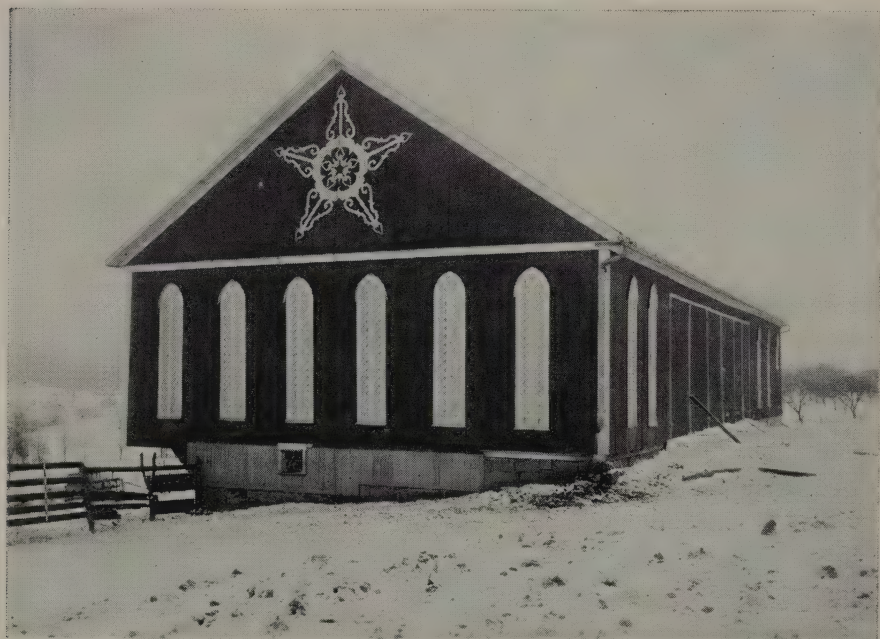
BRICK-END DECORATED BARN NEAR MECHANICSBURG, CUMBERLAND COUNTY, PA.





*Photo courtesy of H. K. Deisher*

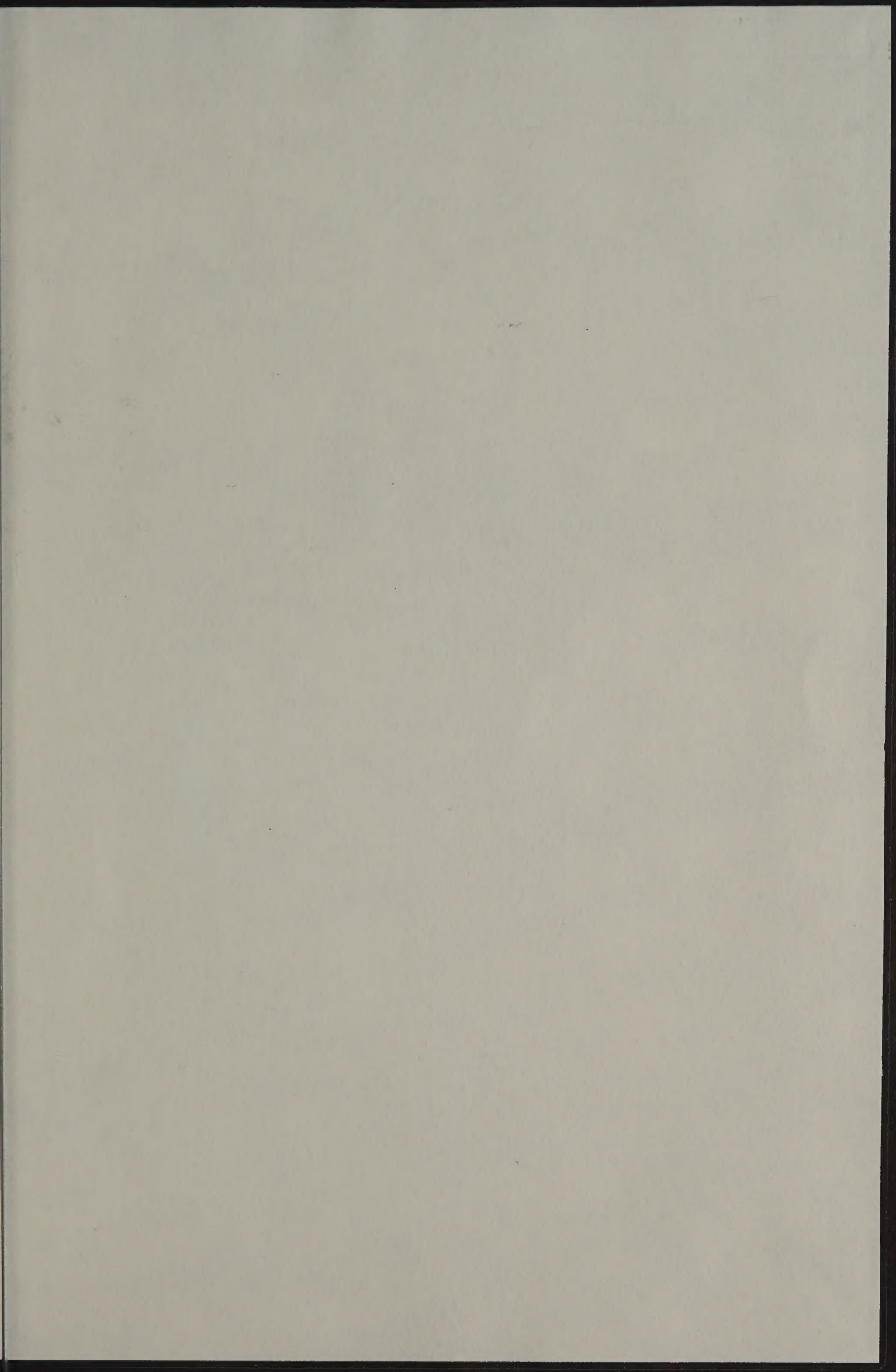
BARN NEAR SOMERSET IN WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA. HERE THE DECORATION IS SAWED  
OUT OF WOOD AND NAILED ON BARN



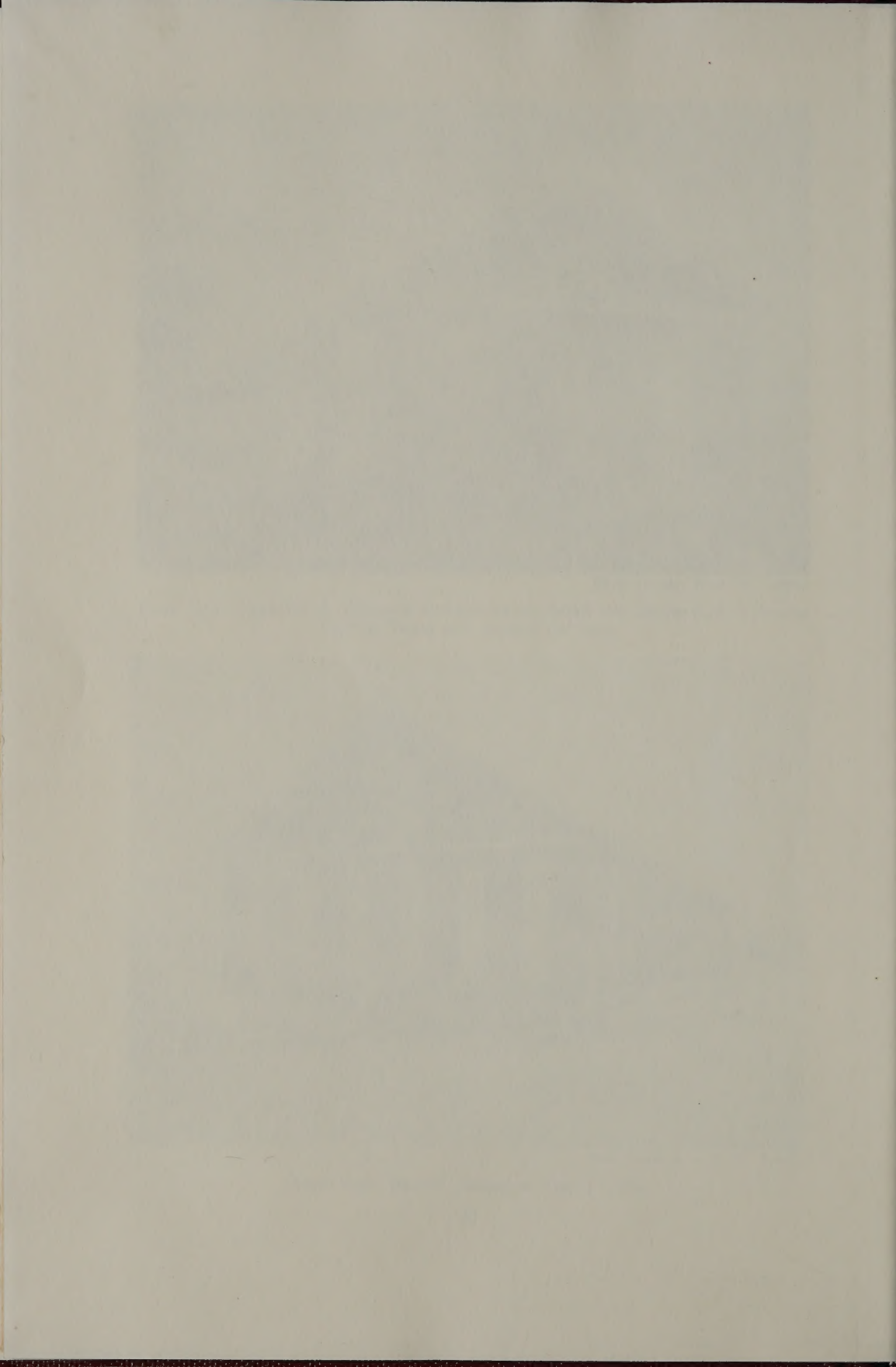
*Photo courtesy of H. K. Deisher*

BARN NEAR BERLIN, SOMERSET COUNTY, PA.









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